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RR RUEHCI
DE RUEHKA #2296/01 1140034
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 240034Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7211
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9052
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7402
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1084
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8500
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 7700
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 002296

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/23/2016

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH CONFRONTED WITH HEROIN PROBLEM

REF: DHAKA 1464

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis; reason para 1.4(d)

¶1. (U) Summary: Intercepted heroin shipments to the UK spawned government attention to a drug problem that Bangladesh has been reluctant to acknowledge. A recently released report by the BDG on the matter reveals gaping holes in the country's counter-narcotics program. Although narcotics testing facilities are able to identify substances, inter-agency bureaucracy stifles the government's ability to be thorough in its response to the issue. End Summary.

UK Seizure Triggers BDG Investigation

¶2. (U) In May, 2005, the UK contacted the BDG with concerns about UK seizures of heroin shipped from Bangladesh and information on their ongoing investigation. In response, the BDG created an "inter-ministerial committee" to investigate the Bangladeshi firms allegedly involved in the smuggling operation. Its report was completed earlier this year, but only came to light recently following media reports. The BDG report confirmed that specific Bangladesh companies engaged in narcotics trafficking, under the guise of commercial export. In what amounted to "corporate identify theft," the committee found that falsified documents were used to get goods out of the country, including Taxpayer Identification Numbers, exporter registrations, and addresses. The report flagged in general terms systemic weaknesses to be addressed and recommended further investigation to determine whether government officials facilitated the smuggling.

¶3. (U) Media stories sensationalized the report's findings, speculating on other firms that might also be involved in the trade. Reports also sought to link the accused companies and their personnel to Jamaat Islami; however, these allegations could not be corroborated.

¶4. (C) Meanwhile, the UK continues to seize heroin smuggled from Bangladesh. In December 2005, the UK seized a shipment of 72.5 kilograms of heroin hidden in furniture shipped from Bangladesh. UK officials formally notified the BDG and requested BDG assistance with their investigation of

two Pakistani nationals charged with smuggling the heroin. The BDG cooperated with UK investigators sent to Bangladesh. The UK has not yet shared the results of its investigation with Bangladesh.

What Drug Problem?

15. (U) The BDG has comforted itself with the belief that its domestic substance abuse problem is largely limited to abuse of codeine-based cough syrup and alcohol. These substances make up the vast majority of domestic seizures. According to the government, Bangladesh has no inherent drug problem. The UK seizures and the BDG's own subsequent investigation have challenged that belief. Moreover, these seizures point to the growing involvement of Bangladesh in the international drug trade. Coupled with anecdotal evidence of rising drug abuse in middle and upper-class youth, the seizures foreshadow a growing drug problem in Bangladesh.

Interagency Cooperation Weak

16. (C) Econoff met recently with Shamsul Islam, the Director General (DG) for the Bangladesh Department of Narcotics Control (DNC), to discuss his agency's efforts on this front. Although listed as a member of the "inter-ministerial committee", Islam's Deputy said that he was not involved with the investigation. He was only consulted when he was asked to sign the report. Islam

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himself had not received a copy of the report; he asked the Embassy to provide him with one, as it would take too long to get it through official channels.

17. (U) The DNC has the labs and equipment to identify drugs, but lacks investigative authority in critical places. The Police and Customs agents are in the field, but are not trained to identify narcotics. Thus, the main issue is how these agencies work together. According to Islam, DNC and Police do not have a role in inspecting any shipments through Bangladesh ports. The media reported that Customs agents are not able to identify one chemical from another, and have had no specialized training to identify narcotic substances.

The USG Role

18. (U) The Department of State and the Department of Justice have worked for several years to build the capacity of the BDG counter-narcotics program. The primary contributions have been in providing sophisticated laboratory equipment and training to the DNC. At this point, the BDG is able to identify narcotics to be used as evidence in prosecutions.

19. (SBU) The case above outlines a clear opportunity to fill a gap within the counter-narcotics efforts of Bangladesh. In the short term, USG training in counter-narcotics investigation could be helpful, particularly if designed to involve customs, police and prosecutors. With the current government expected to leave office in October, longer-term engagement will likely have to wait until after elections, expected in January 2007.

BUTENIS